

TECHWOOD HOMES (Public Housing)
Bounded by North Avenue, Parker Street
Williams Street and Lovejoy Street
Atlanta
Fulton County
Georgia

HABS No. GA-2257

HABS
GA,
61-ATLA,
60-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Southeast Region
Department of the Interior
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

HABS
GA
61-ATLA,
60-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TECHWOOD HOMES (Public Housing)

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Location:

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Atlanta
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Georgia

U.S.G.S. Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: Northing
3739/560, Easting 741/600

Present Owner:

Atlanta Housing Authority
739 West Peachtree
Atlanta, Georgia 30365

Present Occupants:

Multiple occupants

Present Use:

Public housing

Significance:

The first federally funded housing project in the United States, Techwood Homes represents the first large-scale attempt to eradicate slum housing in a socially humanitarian way in this country. Techwood's emphasis on living standards and community planning - as illustrated by its engineering and construction techniques, site layout, landscape and open space design - served as an experimental model for subsequent public housing projects.

PART I. PHYSICAL CONTEXT OF TECHWOOD HOMES

Techwood Homes covers an eleven-block area of Atlanta in Fulton County. It is bounded by North Avenue, Parker Street, Williams Street, and Lovejoy Street. It is bordered on the northwest by Coca-Cola's corporate headquarters, on the north by the Georgia Institute of Technology ("Georgia Tech"), on the east by Interstates 75 and 85, and on the south by downtown Atlanta. Previously the site of 197 substandard residential units housing 279 families, the first federally funded slum-clearance housing project in the country was entered on the National Register of Historic Places as the Techwood Homes Historic District on June 29, 1976 (Atlanta Housing Authority 1979, np).

In his November 29, 1935 dedication of Techwood Homes, President Franklin D. Roosevelt described the milestone in public housing in the following way:

Within sight of us today stands a tribute to useful work under government supervision Here at the request of the citizens of Atlanta, we have cleaned out nine square blocks of antiquated, squalid dwellings, for years a detriment to the community Within a very short time, people who never before could get a decent roof over their heads will live here in reasonable comfort amid healthful, worthwhile surroundings, (and soon) others will find similar opportunities in nearly all the older, overcrowded cities of the United States (Atlanta Housing Authority 1986, 2).

As part of the 1996 Olympic Housing Impact Area, a 4.5 acre section of the complex will be demolished, including the Store and Administration Building (HABS No. GA-2257-A), Garage Building A-D (HABS No. GA-2257-B), and Residential Buildings 1 (HABS No. GA-2257-C), 2 (HABS No. GA-2257-D), and 3 (HABS No. GA-2257-E), will be redeveloped as part of the Olympic Village.

PART II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF TECHWOOD HOMES

The Techwood Homes public housing project is a product of the formative years of public housing in the United States. The first hundred days of President Roosevelt's administration brought sweeping social and economic legislation to revitalize a nation ravaged by the Depression. The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 empowered the President to establish the Federal Administration of Public Works (later, the PWA) and spend over three billion dollars on construction projects. NIRA's provisions for slum clearance and low-income housing drew the attention of Atlanta real estate developer and promotor Charles F. Palmer, who focused on trying to redevelop the "Techwood Flats" slum near Georgia Tech. Palmer had studied slum clearance programs in Europe in 1930 and saw the opportunity for Atlanta to benefit from the PWA programs. Palmer won the support and participation of other prominent Atlanta citizens, including Mayor James L. Key, architect Flippen Burge, and *Atlanta Constitution* publisher Clark Howell, Sr.

As the first federally funded housing project constructed under the auspices of the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration (PWA), Techwood Homes served as a model for subsequent public housing projects throughout the country as well as in Atlanta. At least 10 projects were constructed in Atlanta in the twenty years following Techwood's 1936 opening. University Homes, Atlanta's first

public housing for blacks, was completed in 1937. Clark Howell Homes, the first complex built by the Atlanta Housing Authority, and John Hope Homes were finished in 1940. Capitol Homes, John J. Eagan Homes, Grady Homes, and Herndon Homes opened in 1941. Carver Homes (1953), Herman E. Perry Homes (1954), and Joel Chandler Harris Homes (1956) are additional slum clearance public housing projects influenced by Techwood.

The impact of these ten housing projects on the city of Atlanta was felt economically and socially. They offered both job opportunities and new affordable housing. They resulted in the clearance of a minimum of 1900 slum dwellings and the construction of almost 7500 new units which initially housed approximately 28,000 people. The construction costs of the projects totaled almost \$40 million (Atlanta Housing Authority 1979, np).

In the years that followed the opening of Techwood Homes, the structure of public housing in the United States underwent several changes. The United States Housing Act of 1937 decentralized the federal housing program and established the Federal Housing Administration, which took over control of Techwood Homes. The Atlanta Housing Authority was created in June of 1938 and took over operation of Techwood Homes in March of 1940.

PART III. HISTORY OF TECHWOOD HOMES

In the spring of 1933, Atlanta real estate developer and promoter Charles Palmer (1892-1973) won the support and participation of other prominent Atlanta citizens in a plan to clear the "Techwood Flats" slum near Georgia Tech. The businessmen formed Techwood, Incorporated and, on October 5, 1933, submitted an application to the PWA for a \$2,375,000 limited-dividend loan. The following week, amid vigorous lobbying by Palmer and his associates, the PWA approved funding for Techwood Homes and also for University Homes, a companion housing project for blacks. In 1934, ownership of Techwood Homes was effectively transferred from the trustees of Techwood, Inc. to the PWA's Federal Emergency Housing Corporation as a result of a switch in project financing from loans to outright grants. These and other events leading up to the development of the Techwood Homes and University Homes projects are chronicled in Corley's "Atlanta's Techwood and University Homes Projects" (Corley 1987-88) and Palmer's *Adventures of a Slum Fighter* (Palmer 1955). Palmer became the first chairman of the Atlanta Housing Authority in 1938, and served as Defense Housing Coordinator and Special Assistant to President Roosevelt during World War II.

Clark Howell, Sr., publisher of The Atlanta Constitution, and close personal friend of President Roosevelt, was an instrumental member of the group of Techwood supporters. Other key figures who made up the original Techwood Board of Trustees organized in 1933 included Dr. M. L. Brittain, president of Georgia Tech, Herbert Choate, Chamber of Commerce president, James L. Key, mayor of Atlanta, Herbert Porter, general manager of the Georgian-American, builder Thorne Flagler, John S. Cohen, editor of The Atlanta Journal, and Sid Tiller, labor representative.

Groundbreaking ceremonies for Techwood Homes were held on September 29, 1934, with Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes initiating the dynamiting of wooden shacks at the site. Construction of the Techwood Homes buildings, including Techwood Dormitory, started in October of 1934 and went on throughout 1935. The first building to be completed, Techwood Dormitory was ready for occupancy

by mid-September of 1935. The Techwood Homes housing project was dedicated on November 29, 1935 and officially opened for occupancy on August 15, 1936. These and other events of project construction are chronicled in newspaper accounts from the time period.

The Atlanta architectural firm of Burge and Stevens (now Stevens and Wilkinson) designed the Techwood Homes project. Burge and Stevens' fee of \$84,000 for the Techwood Homes project was the largest in the firm's history and, according to Stevens in a 1981 interview, played a pivotal role in sustaining the firm through the Depression (Corley 23). According to an account in *City Builder*, Flippen Burge and project engineer T. T. Flagler visited apartment developments underway in several "northern cities" to observe the most up-to-date construction techniques and equipment systems (*City Builder* 1933, 14). J. A. Jones Construction Company of Charlotte, North Carolina built Techwood at a cost of \$2,108,337, which included purchase of the land at 49 cents a square foot.

According to the original drawings prepared by Burge and Stevens, the landscape architect was Norman C. Butts. A graduate of Cornell University, Mr. Butts was a horticulturalist who worked as a landscape architect and later designed landscaping for major highway projects in Georgia (Henderson interview, 1993).

At least three artists were associated with the development of Techwood Homes. WPA sculptor Ahron Ben-Shmuel sculpted a fawn at rest which was placed in the court on Techwood between Pine and Hunnicutt Streets on December 20, 1937. E. Neff painted five Uncle Remus murals in the auditorium, and Daniel Boza painted an oil impression of Don Quixote in the lobby of Techwood's management office (Techwood Homes 1938, 3).

Several Techwood residents have become famous entrepreneurs. Truett Cathy, founder and president of the Chick-Fil-A restaurant chain, moved into 466 Techwood Drive in 1936. The Days Inn of America founder, Cecil B. Day, Sr., lived there while he was a student at Georgia Tech.

Techwood Homes has been the site of numerous locally significant historic events. Within two hours of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Techwood-Clark Howell Defense Unit No. 162 of the State Defense Corps was on duty guarding the Atlanta Waterworks.

PART IV. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF TECHWOOD HOMES

As originally completed in August of 1936, Techwood Homes was a self-contained neighborhood of 604 living units comprised of 397 three-room apartments, 128 four-room, 53 five-room, and 26 single-room units, arranged in blocks of several two-story townhouses or three-story apartment houses. There were seven townhouse groups and 13 apartment buildings. A total of 11 garage buildings, with a 186-car capacity, were located along perimeter streets behind the housing blocks. A store and administration building, and four enclosed play areas completed Techwood's original configuration. Only 26% of the total 24.8 acres was taken up by the buildings. The remaining land was designed as landscaped community open space (Atlanta Housing Authority 1986, 5).

Techwood's architecture is described as "modified Georgian" in the National Register nomination. All of the buildings were designed with narrow transverse dimensions to meet the Housing Division of the

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Public Works Administration's standards for ample light and air (Atlanta Urban Design Commission 1987, 130). They were constructed of concrete to be fireproof. Only the doors within the apartments were of wood construction (Atlanta Journal/Constitution July 10, 1936).

The interiors were hailed as "marvelous" by Mrs. M. L. Brittain, wife of the Georgia Tech president. A 1936 Atlanta Journal/Constitution article describes the interior appointments in the following way:

The neat, compact and modern kitchens . . . white enamel steel cabinets . . . garbage disposal system . . . electric stove, compact and brilliantly white, has three burners and an oven. The sink . . . is divided into two compartments, one being a sink and the other a laundry tub . . . new electric refrigerator . . .

The entrance halls are of green tile, the steps of concrete and cast iron . . . In the living rooms . . . an absence of baseboards, where they say vermin frequently gather . . . there are wall plugs, a galaxy of them . . . a receptacle in the living room for plugging in the radio antenna . . .

The bathrooms are modern, glistening white . . . windows framed in steel . . . Copper screenings have been installed in each window . . . The floors of the living room and bedroom are covered with maroon asphalt tile with black tile border . . . The walls and ceilings are cream, buff or peach.

Additional modern amenities included five laundry facilities equipped with electric heating plates, dryers, and ironing boards, community auditorium, kindergarten, library, and health center.

Landscaping was an important element of the original site plan. An estimated \$69,000 was spent on grass, shrubs, and trees, including mimosas, crape myrtles, Chinese and American elms, and dogwoods. Techwood Drive was lined with oaks 20-30 feet tall. One hundred benches were interspersed throughout the grounds.

There have been several changes to the Techwood Homes site over the years. At the time of the 1976 National Register nomination, the garage buildings were in a state of near ruin; subsequent additions to the complex placed them close to the center of the project rather than at its periphery. The area in closest proximity to the Georgia Tech campus, which was originally used for playgrounds and tennis courts, currently serves as a parking lot and site for Roosevelt House, constructed by Millkey & Associates in 1972, as senior citizen housing.

The buildings themselves have undergone alterations and renovations. The administration building was remodeled in July of 1955, by James C. Wise. It is believed that the open store fronts were enclosed at this time. In the 1980's, the Atlanta Housing Authority obtained a \$17.2 million grant from HUD through the Comprehensive Improvement Assistance Program. This grant, shared with Clark Howell Homes, was used to upgrade bathroom and kitchen facilities. All kitchen cabinets were restained and painted inside; They were replaced where needed. Bathroom accessories were replaced as needed as were ceilings and ceramic tile areas over tubs. Marble thresholds replaced the wooden ones in all bathrooms. Grab bars and handheld showers were installed in all handicapped-accessible units.

The grant was also used to install vinyl tile flooring, new windows, and roofing, to modify closets, add bookshelves and washer alcoves, and insulate vent stacks. It provided electrical work, exterior door replacements, and interior painting. Also the original steam boiler/electric baseboard heating system was replaced with an energy efficient, gas-fired hot water circulation system (Atlanta Housing Authority 1986, 12). Allain and Associates and James Patterson Associates were the architectural firms who drew the plans for the 1981 comprehensive modernization of Techwood Homes. Newcomb and Boyd Engineers of Atlanta did the plumbing, electrical, and mechanical renovations. Ray Gustafson and Associates were responsible for the civil engineering, and Harry Baldwin, landscape architect, also of Atlanta relandscaped the property.

More than fifty years after its dedication by President Roosevelt as America's first federally-funded public housing project, Techwood Homes "still stands as a symbol of hope - and despair" (New York Times August 21, 1986).

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3. Supplemental material: Following this narrative format text are two 8 1/2" x 11" sketch drawings as follows:

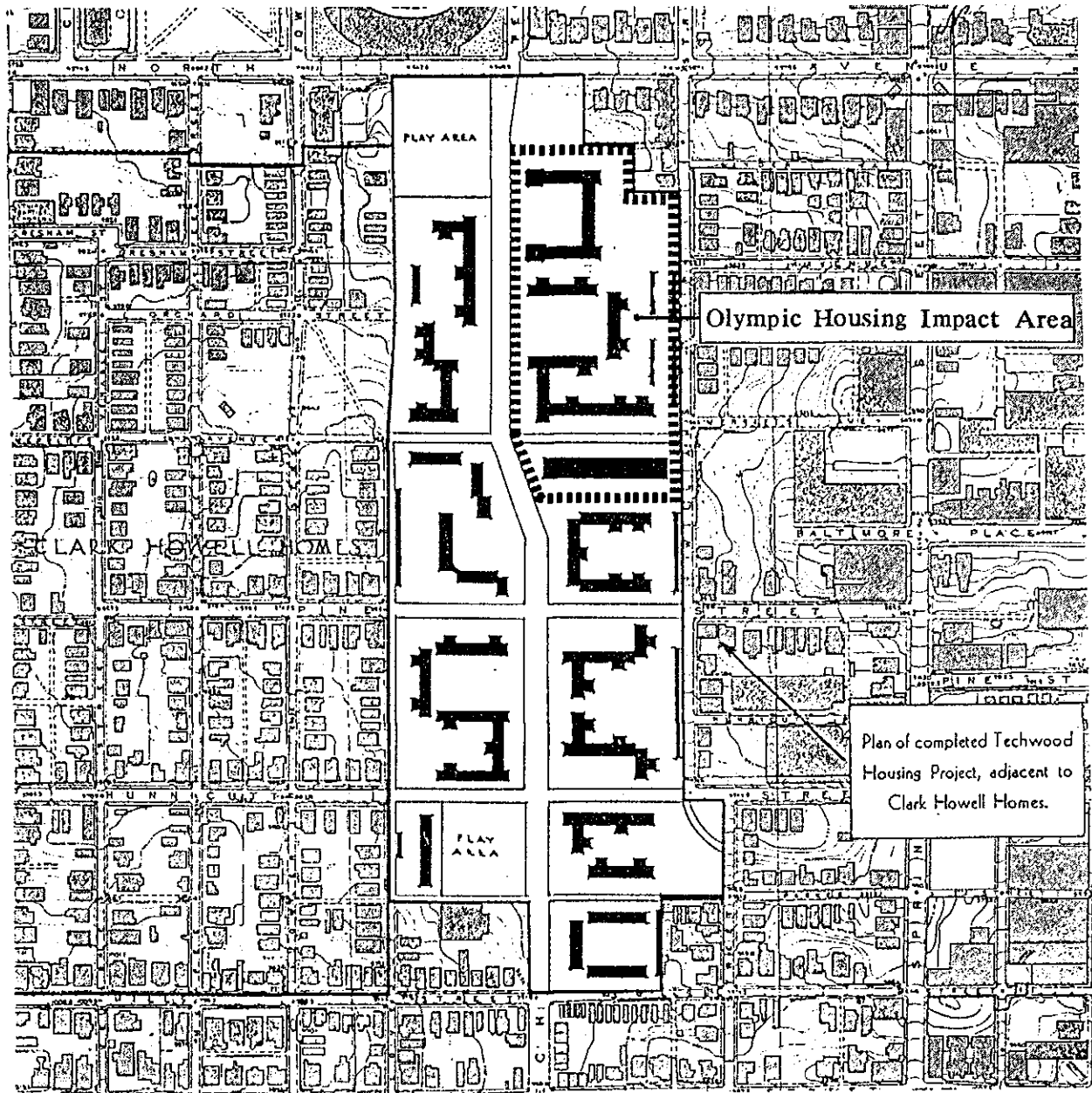
- Historic site plan of Techwood Homes
- Site plan of existing historic district with Olympic Housing Impact Area buildings indicated

4. Interviews: An interview with landscape architect Edith Henderson was conducted by Kit Sutherland in Atlanta, Georgia on June 22, 1993. Mrs. Henderson was one of several landscape architects who designed landscaping for the original Techwood Homes site in the mid-1930s. She stated that she did not design the landscaping around Techwood Dormitory but was able to provide information about Norman C. Butts, the landscape architect whose name appears on the Burge and Stevens site plan drawings.

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HISTORIC SITE PLAN OF TECHWOOD HOMES



SITE PLAN OF TECHWOOD HOMES HISTORIC DISTRICT

